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SOUTH

WEEKLY

THE BLIZZARD OF '78

A record 27.1 inches of snow fell in 32 hours and 40 minutes; tides were 16 feet above normal; 10,000 people living in coastal areas were evacuated; 3,500 vehicles were stranded for days on Route 128. National Guardsmen and federal troops were mobilized for rescue and cleanup efforts.



More than 25 houses, including this one, were demolished on Scituate's Peggotty Beach during the blizzard.

1978 GLOBE FILE PHOTO

Memories of chaos and camaraderie linger



GLOBE PHOTO / KERRY BRETT

'It was a real team effort. High school students volunteered, and employees... volunteered to deliver food trays to patients. That week I arrived at work at 3 or 4 a.m. because that was when I could get a ride with the National Guard or the police. We had plenty of food in the freezer, we fed everyone. We fed the snow shovelers, the civil defense and the national guard. We also did some special things, like no charge for coffee and muffins...'

WILLIAM MOLISSE, food services director
at South Shore Hospital

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Feb. 6 and 7, 1978, the Blizzard of '78, one of the most harrowing storms in Massachusetts history: Twenty-nine deaths, billions of dollars in property damage, chilling memories that even now can send shivers down spines.

But even as wild nature gave us its worst, human nature gave us its best. From Hull to Lakeville, Westwood to Plymouth, the people whose lives are dedicated to helping others were needed, and they came through.

They were nurses and doctors, firefighters and police officers and DPW truck drivers, National Guardsmen, selectmen and civil defense directors — and hundreds or perhaps even thousands of ordinary people. They helped neighbors, they helped friends, they helped total strangers.

This weekend, some of them were gathering to remember the Blizzard of '78, to reminisce about the storm and its aftermath, when it seemed everyone south of Boston was trying to be a Good Samaritan.

The Massachusetts National Guard battalion stationed at Weymouth Armory, led by the unit's first sergeant, William Manning, organized a Saturday night Snow Ball at the Weymouth Elks Club. Guard members were invited — 5,000 were mobilized for rescue and cleanup work statewide — and so, too, were many others

involved in those rescue efforts 20 years ago. They all were invited to come, to bring photographs and memories and stories.

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Monstrous waves swept South Shore beaches like malicious open-hand slaps across the face, smashing cherished houses into kindling. Thousands of coastal residents would have to be evacuated from their homes, Hull to Plymouth, as tides rose to 12, 14, 16 feet above normal.

Hull was isolated. Only police, firefighters and the National Guard could use the roads. "Beach Avenue was just a crater, it was completely taken away," recalled Hull Fire Chief Nick Russo. "Paragon Park was under seven feet of water. The ocean and the bay met in the middle of Paragon Park." Even media vehicles with all-access passes from the State Police were excluded from Hull, so many people to this day don't realize just how hard hit Hull was, Russo said.

Russo recalled most vividly two fires, two houses that burned to the ground. One was on Town Way, said Russo, and as the fire blazed, a family of six huddled on the front porch praying for rescue. Hull firefighters half-waded, half-swam through water that was five or six feet deep in places to reach the family. "Then they carried them to safety on their shoulders," said Russo matter-of-factly.

Two or three days after the snow stopped falling, the ocean's fury had not abated when a house fire broke on C Street, 100 yards from Nantasket Beach. Russo was on the scene with his men quickly, but the fire apparatus couldn't be

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Vivid memories of Blizzard of '78 linger

■ BLIZZARD

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driven through the water. "We strung hose from a hydrant that was on dry ground. We had a guy on lookout for big waves, and every time one came in, we had to shut the hose line down and grab onto the hedges so we wouldn't get swept away. All we could do was contain the fire so it wouldn't spread to the houses next to it."

Sergeant Manning of the National Guard was in Hull, too, and he recalls that for him the first week of storm duty was like one endless day. He spent most of the time evacuating Hull residents from flooded homes, some of them twice, as tide surges returned to make successive evacuations necessary.

Nantasket Avenue was completely submerged, he said, and Route 3A in neighboring Hingham was clogged by cars abandoned in the snow.

"We towed cars, buses, trucks to clear the road and get people out of Hull," he said. Manning and the 60 other men in the Weymouth unit also helped transport doctors and nurses to and from work, took kidney patients to the dialysis treatments that kept them alive, did whatever seemed most pressing.

The National Guard was on active duty for two weeks. Manning never found time to go home to Weymouth. Something else always needed to be done.

Meanwhile, in Scituate, at least 50 houses were swept away by the storm surge, recalled retired firefighter John Noble.

"The 44-foot Coast Guard boat in the harbor got its propeller tangled in a line from one of the commercial fishing boats it was trying to bring to safety," said Noble. "The Coast Guard boat suddenly was without power. It was crashing helplessly against the Harbor View Restaurant. The Coast Guard guys were able to jump out of the boat onto the roof of the restaurant."

Two of the storm's fatalities were recorded in Scituate Harbor, Noble said. A town DPW worker and a little girl being rescued were thrown from a fire rescue boat and died in the frigid waters before they could be pulled out.

Inland, gale-force winds and the endlessly falling snow combined to create dangerous, frightening, total-whiteout conditions everywhere south of Boston. Police chiefs and fire chiefs shuddered as the radio calls came in from cruisers and pumpers trying to respond to emergencies: "We can't see, chief. We can't move. We can't get there." And they radioed back, "Keep trying."

Homeward-bound commuters on Route 128 slowed to a crawl, then stopped, then realized with fright their cars were going nowhere, not for hours, not for days. The drifts piled up higher and higher. Sooner or later, they would have to venture out — into that! — to seek shelter on foot. Shelter? Where?

Dedham Police Lieutenant John Teti recalled that in the Dedham-Westwood area, an 8-mile stretch of Route 128 became a parking lot early in the storm. Some 3,500 cars and trucks were buried in snow that reached to windshields, even buried some vehicles completely.

As the commuters searched for havens, Teti said, the Showcase Cinema on Elm Street in Dedham opened its doors to become an emergency shelter, while the motel across the street, now the Comfort Inn, also provided sanctuary. The National Guard found those refugees, said Teti, and the basic food the Guard

rooms were so devastated they were unusable for the rest of the school year.

Power lines went down. Hospitals were running on emergency generators, civil defense headquarters were running on emergency generators, government itself was running on emergency generators.

"The whole area was crippled," said Dr. Charles Gaughan, a cardiologist at South Shore Hospital in Weymouth. "I've never seen the hospital like that since. It was like a command center," he recalled.

The National Guard was using amphibious military landing craft — the "ducks" so popular now with tourists in Plymouth and Boston — to transport people to and from the hospital, Gaughan said.

"I remember when they announced that one of the landing craft was about to leave for Rockland Center and that people could get a ride if they wanted. You really had the sense that something big was going on," he said.

William Molisse, food services director at the hospital, said, "It was a real team effort. High school students volunteered, and employees outside my department volunteered to deliver food trays to patients. That week I arrived at work at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. — usually I get in about 6 — because that was when I could get a ride with the National Guard or the police.

"We had plenty of food in the freezer, we fed everyone," said Molisse. "We fed the snow shovelers, the Civil Defense, the National Guard. We would do some special things, like no charge for coffee and muffins, and we'd leave cookies and coffee for the overnight crew."

The camaraderie at hospitals across the region was something special. Nurses and other employees stayed at their posts as long as they were needed. Beverly White, a nursing supervisor at Quincy Hospital then (and a patient advocate now), recalled she routinely worked double shifts. She and the other supervisors took turns sleeping.

"I slept on a stretcher in the recovery room," White said. "People came together. No one crabbled about staying." Sheila Dixon, a nurse at Caritas Norwood Hospital, felt the same spirit of togetherness: "It was kind of like a big pajama party."

Others, home when the storm hit, found ways to relieve their colleagues. Betsy Beniers, a nurse at Quincy Hospital, skied to work. Nurse Beth Malvestria got to the hospital, then went out in a four-wheel-drive vehicle with a patient who was returning home. "He had only hospital pajamas to wear," she said, "so we wrapped him in blankets. His family met us with a toboggan — and jackets for him."

Among Dr. Gaughan's most vivid memories are two lives lost due to the storm. One of his coronary patients became so worried when he found out his home in Hull had been flooded that he insisted on leaving the hospital to check on the property. "He never made it home. He died an hour after leaving," Gaughan said.

He also recalled the 5-year-old girl, Amy Lanzikos, who was brought to the hospital after she had fallen out of a rescue boat in storm-racked Scituate Harbor. "There was nothing we could do for her," said Gaughan sadly. The body of Scituate DPW employee Edward Hart, 62, who also died in that boat accident, was not found for weeks, recalled Scituate firefighter Noble.

Noble also recalled a story with a

house," recalled Kenney, "and we hadn't had power for days, so we had no radio or TV, and I had no idea how much snow there was. A neighbor with a two-way radio called civil defense."

A helicopter was dispatched, in hopes it could land on a public basketball court near Kenney's house, but the basket posts were too close together for the chopper to land, she said. Instead, "They put me on a toboggan and began dragging me up the street. It was late in the afternoon and just getting dark," she said. A police cruiser was dispatched to meet Kenney on the toboggan. "He had to back the cruiser all the way, about a mile, because there was no place to turn around."

She had been planning to have her first child at a Boston hospital, but the public safety officials had other ideas. "They told me 'No way, you are going to the nearest hospital.' So they took me to South Shore. Kris was born 20 minutes after I got there."

Kristopher Kenney is now a sophomore at Westfield State College. "My mother is a pretty strong lady. It's a wild story." For the first few years of his life, he said, he was nicknamed "Stormy" by the neighbors.

His mother wasn't scared during her trek to the hospital, or nervous, at least not until later. "It was a truly wonderful experience," she said. "My only regret is that I didn't get to ride in a helicopter."